

Undress the Doll (alternate version)

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Until I was eleven years old, my family went on trips to Japan each summer. I would help my aunt pick plums from a tree in her backyard, and she would tell me stories, but I don't speak Japanese, so I wouldn't understand, and we would laugh about this, and she would continue telling me stories that I wouldn't understand.

We were a strange inconvenience to them, to my father, coming home with his American wife and his American children, who looked a lot like them but didn't know how to interact and needed their translating father as their voice in every setting.

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At my grandfather's house, my aunt would take me into the side room where she dressed me in layers of fabric — in a bright, yellow kimono with patterns of large butterflies and long sleeves that almost touched the floor. She would comb and put up my long hair with an elegant comb made of bamboo and tell me how beautiful it all was. My father came in and translated for her; My actions should mirror the beauty of the outfit, of the process. Sitting around a low table in the main room of the house, we would light incense and candles in my grandmother's shrine and someone would tell the story of how she had been stronger than many soldiers who cried and crumbled at the pressure of herding families to shelter during the fire bombings of World War II. Sometimes, my aunt would tell stories of running through streets surrounded by crumbling, flame-filled buildings with her mother, trying to find somewhere to go. But grandfather didn't like those stories and after the first few years, my father stopped translating them for us, and after a few more they ceased to be recognized or shared at all.

Shortly after the stories, a deliveryman arrived with boxes of sushi strapped to his bike. We sat at the table and ate together. There was a lot of talking I didn't understand. My father would translate

every now and then but had trouble carrying us through the quick flow of conversation and would eventually give up. Then I would sit silently with my feet tucked perfectly under my legs, smiling at someone every so often to appear engaged and attentive. After a few hours, someone would comment on how well-mannered I was. My grandfather would beam that my beauty and perfect manners — my sweet silence — was that of old, traditional, Japanese ways that had been lost on today's youth, but I had shown that these ways had not been lost on me.

How could a little girl raised in America be more Japanese than all the little girls raised in Japan?

Everyone would laugh. I used to wish he knew I was only so *perfect* because a language barrier restrained me from participating any further.

To the relatives on my father's side, I was more of a paper doll than a part of the family. My cousins and aunts would gush over my snow white skin, paler than their own, and they would touch it, and I would feel naked, and my father would laugh and tell me that I am so loved, and I would think, *there is a difference between praise and love*, and I would tell him I didn't feel accepted and he would tell me that this makes sense because I'm not truly a part of this world, of his world — I am only an American.

Twenty crushes, thirteen big lies, ten weeks of being grounded, seven transitions to "new homes", three cats, two dogs, and one "first love" later, I was beginning my first year of college.

Then, most people I met wouldn't call me by my name. I was more commonly addressed as Asian Princess and Asian Goddess and more often than not, felt like I was back in my grandfather's house, folding my feet perfectly under my legs. I was picked up and spun, the same way I had been as a child. I was carried and talked to and talked at. Boys would place me on their laps and have conversations with other boys about topics I knew too little about to participate in. It felt the same. In my dreams, my aunt would take off my American clothes to make me into the Japanese doll she

always wanted. Men would unwrap me, layer by layer, to get to the Japanese doll they always wanted. No one ever asked. Puppet. My new nicknames found a companion when a pledging for a boy pledging for a fraternity was given the pledge nickname "Hiroshima" for having sex with me.

On the seventieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor, I'm standing outside, smoking a cigarette when two boys walk up to me. One asks me if I'll feel Franklin Roosevelt spanking my ancestors into internment camps when I close my eyes tonight. The other asks me if spanking is what I'm into. They tell me they wouldn't mind finding out the Asian Princess is dirty in bed. We all laugh and they walk away while I stand still in the same spot, looking down at my stomach, wondering what kind of laughter was just raised from it.

When you ask me where I'm from, you want to know about my race or my ethnicity. You want to know about my history. You believe by knowing this about me, you'll know so much about me. I imagine you don't, but always wonder if you pick up on my sudden shortened breathing patterns due to the slight pinch of pain I feel when I tell you my mother is white and my father is Japanese. If you inquire further about family, trying to decide for yourself how Japanese I really am, or how white I really am, eventually you start to notice discomfort weave its way through my body language as my eyes disengage from yours, and my mind wanders somewhere else, because I don't want to talk about it.

I don't want to talk about how the strongest ties I feel to my Japanese heritage are through micro-aggressions and the consistent sexual objectification of my body, organized through other's perceptions of my race, experienced in the country I was raised in. I don't want to talk about how almost every person I meet feels they have the ability to judge "how Japanese I really am," and that I don't even know what this means. What am I being judged on? What is the criteria? No one will tell

me and my Japanese father will tell me if I was really Japanese I wouldn't have to ask, and the stinging tears that fall from my almond-shaped eyes know that he's right.